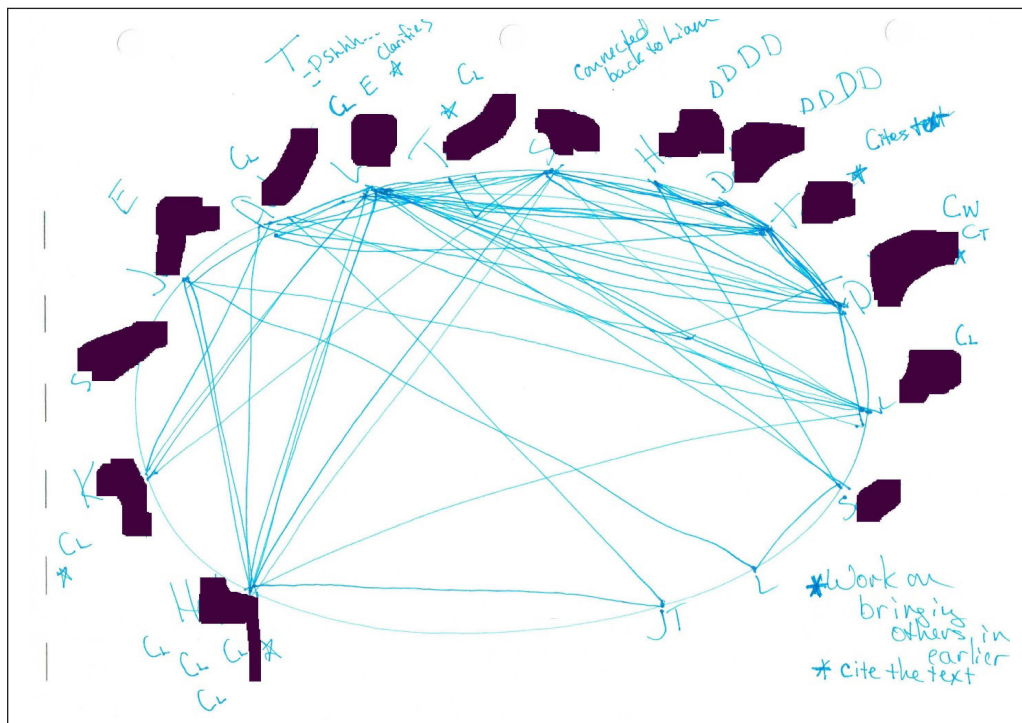


Appendix 2.2. A Brief Explanation of a Harkness Discussion Circle

Using a Harkness discussion circle has revitalized dialogue and analysis in my classroom. This simple to execute yet intrinsically complex strategy allows students from each spectrum of the discussion comfort area to interact and offer ideas for discussion. I have personally observed students who are otherwise reluctant to interact flourish and comfortably exchange views; conversely, students who have a tendency to take over discussion begin to rein in their dominant tendencies.

You don't need to have an actual Harkness table to conduct this activity; simply placing chairs in an oval will suffice. First, introduce the norms for discussion to promote success. Some of the norms I frequently use with my classes include (1) refer to the text (i.e., article, guiding question, book chapter), (2) encourage others to speak, (3) support your claims with evidence, (4) and come to class prepared. Throughout the discussion, observe the interaction using some type of evaluation method as an assessment as well as feedback for the students. I prefer a "spiderweb" type of assessment because it allows me to listen and observe the discussion while easily noting the strengths and needs of both the whole group and individual students. Using a simple notation system, I can quickly capture what happened.



Each point on the oval represents a student participant. Lines are drawn showing the path of the discussion.

Try to balance using Harkness discussion circles with other classroom discussion models. If used too frequently, the practice becomes stale and loses its effectiveness; if not used regularly, students do not have the opportunity to practice enough to become proficient. Resources for conducting a Harkness discussion can be found fairly easily through an Internet search. The history of the Harkness discussion can be found at the Phillips Exeter Academy site, http://www.exeter.edu/admissions/109_1220_11688.aspx, which hosts a number of videos that can help build an understanding of the process.